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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 003424

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TAGS: [KN](#) [KS](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#)

SUBJECT: THE HEAT IS ON: OFFICIAL PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN  
KICKS OFF

REF: A. SEOUL 3312

[¶](#)B. SEOUL 3225

Classified By: POL Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

[¶](#)1. (C) Summary: The 23-day official presidential campaign period kicked off November 27 with large rallies consisting mostly of yelling, dancing and hugging of voters. Despite the compact campaign period, bubbling scandals, late entries of candidates and intrigue surrounding North Korea, Park Geun-hye's support of Lee Myung-bak and possible liberal mergers, most people are not interested in the election. In addition to overwhelming support in polls, there is a sense of inevitability, even among many liberals, that Grand National Party (GNP) candidate Lee Myung-bak will win. On top of Lee Myung-bak's almost 20 percent lead over his closest challenger, the GNP enjoys 55 percent support, compared to support in the low teens for the United New Democratic Party (UNDP). Some analysts believe the support for the party, more than support for Lee Myung-bak, will carry him to victory. In the mad dash to December 19, the last chance for any candidate other than Lee "bulldozer" Myung-bak is not to hope for the complicated BBK scandal to explode, but rather attempt to gin up a convincing message or issue of their own. End Summary

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Liberal Alliance Hopes Fading Fast  
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[¶](#)2. (C) The failure of the attempted UNDP-DP merger (reftel A) has left Chung Dong-young with few options in the hunt for votes on December 19. Chung continues to try to unite non-GNP candidates, but a general lack of support for liberal candidates mean these mergers (if they happen) are not likely to increase Chung's support ratings more than more than a few percentage points. A recent poll showed that the public itself was split over the benefits of a unified liberal candidate, with 40 percent in favor of fielding a unified progressive candidate and 40.5 percent opposed. Having failed to unite liberal candidates, Chung is reportedly trying to lure former Prime Minister and former candidate Koh Gun into his camp.

[¶](#)3. (C) Notably, Chung has been unsuccessful in merging with Moon Kuk-hyun, the only candidate who could provide an almost-significant boost in the polls. A close Moon adviser told poloff that, because of significant policy differences

between the two camps, merging with Chung would only been seen as political maneuvering that would not instill confidence in either party. In fact, Moon has said that the only way he would merge with Chung is if the latter takes full responsibility for the mistakes of the current administration and issues a public apology, a demand that is improbable at best.

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BBK Scandal: Mountain or Molehill?  
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¶4. (SBU) Alleged BBK conspirator Kim Kyung-joon's family continues to assert linkages between current presidential frontrunner Lee Myung-bak and the stock manipulation scandal. Kim's mother arrived in Seoul early on November 23 to submit the alleged original business documents linking Lee Myung-bak to Kim Kyung-joon and the BBK scandal to the prosecution. Media reports are attributing the fall in Lee's support rate -- from 51 percent in early November to his current 41 percent - to the BBK scandal, however his rates have actually remained steady after the initial hit he took when Lee Hoi-chang entered the race. Additionally, he still holds almost a 20 percentage lead over the next most popular candidate. Still, the Lee Myung-bak camp is holding its breath as the Prosecution Office's interim report -- due out December 5 -- could still inflict damage. A recent Hankook Ilbo poll showed that support for Lee could fall to as low as 29.3 percent if he is confirmed to be involved in the stock manipulation scam.

¶5. (C) Lee Myung-bak's competitors have been unable to leverage the BBK fallout and narrow the gap. Conservative independent candidate Lee Hoi-chang stands the most to gain from Lee Myung-bak's troubles, according to the same Hankook

Ilbo poll. Meanwhile, Chung Dong-young would gain less than 2 percentage points should the probe connect Lee to BBK. The largest expected increase would be in the number of undecided voters which could result in low voter turnout and/or a split vote among candidates. Unequivocal evidence of Lee Myung-bak's guilt will probably diminish his lead, but progressive and conservative pundits alike still opine that Lee Myung-bak will emerge victorious on December 19.

¶6. (C) Leading political observer Park Song-min told poloff November 30 that in polling he had done, support of Lee Myung-bak was below the roughly 40 percent reported in the press at between 32-33 percent. A rising number of Lee Myung-bak supporters are now undecided pending the outcome of the December 5 announcement by the Prosecutor's Office. Pollsters continue to ask undecided voters to pick someone and this multiple questioning accounts for an additional 5 percent support for Lee. While Lee, due to his campaign's poor management of the BBK scandal could lose his lead in polls in the next 10 days, by December 19, Lee's support should regroup enough to carry the election, Park concluded.

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Issues: What Issues?  
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¶7. (SBU) The overall feeling among pundits and political observers is one of frustration and a general lack of enthusiasm for the election. One of Korea's leading liberal thinkers Korea University Professor Choi Jang-jip said recently that this was "the worst election ever" because it was not about the issues and the political parties were not playing a role in the election. Many contacts have told poloffs that the election is "not fun" and there were no major issues present to motivate voters as in 2002. Professor Kang Won-taek over a recent lunch meeting said that in 2002 people, particularly the youth, were engaged in the campaign process, motivated by a desire for social reform and feelings of anti-Americanism. This election, however, lacked any motivating factors and the public seem to be generally frustrated by the candidates. Political cleavages between the liberals and conservatives was successfully exploited in

2002, Kang said, but this year, there has been no collective grievance to motivate voters and spur them to support a liberal candidate.

**¶18.** (SBU) A general preoccupation with the BBK embezzlement scandal (Reftel B) and other scandals involving the political parties, candidates, and most recently Korea's leading chaebol, Samsung, have almost completely obfuscated the policy debate, and has left the public with a lackluster attitude about the election. Televised debates scheduled for December 6, 11, and 16 are slated to focus on issues like foreign affairs, economics, and educational reform. Lee Myung-bak declined to participate in two additional debates that were scheduled to air on MBC and KBS December 1-2 because of his camp's concern that the discussion would focus on BBK allegations instead of on policy.

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The Campaign  
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**¶19.** (SBU) The official campaign period began on November 27. The candidates are touring the country holding rallies and the camps are focusing much energy and money on TV, newspaper and radio ads. Already, a Chung Dong-young ad that attacked Lee Myung-bak by saying Lee was good at "disguising himself" has caused the GNP to file a libel suit against Chung. After December 12, the announcement of polling results is banned. There is speculation about the possibility of a sudden "surprise" merger on December 18 just before the election, but the potential for a progressive merger to have major influence as it did in 2002 is unlikely.

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Candidates Register  
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**¶10.** (C) Official registration for the 2007 South Korean presidential election closed November 26, yielding twelve candidates who will vie for the presidency -- the most to ever run in a South Korean presidential election. Many note

the record number of candidates is likely due to the proximity of the April 2008 National Assembly elections -- several of the candidates with no chance to win in December hope their campaigning will increase their profile and help their chances in April. The top three candidates, Lee Myung-bak, Lee Hoi-chang, and Chung Dong-young, are most likely to receive the bulk of the vote, with the rest having low approval ratings and being widely unknown.

--Lee Myung-bak: The current frontrunner from the conservative Grand National Party (GNP) has held a strong lead over the competition for over 13 months. Despite Lee Hoi-chang's recent entry and continued allegations of scandal, Lee Myung-bak has maintained a commanding lead over Lee Hoi-chang and Chung Dong-young. In a November 27-8 Realmeter poll, he received 39.2 percent support and 60.8 percent of respondents said they expected Lee would be elected.

--Lee Hoi-chang: Currently in second place with an approval rating of 20.2 percent according to a November 27-28 Realmeter poll, the former GNP member quit the party to run as an independent despite his vow to leave politics following his defeat by Roh Moo-hyun in the 2002 presidential race.

--Chung Dong-young: Chung toppled former Gyeonggi Governor Sohn Hak-kyu to win the United New Democratic Party (UNDP) primary, but thus far his campaign has failed to build momentum and his approval rating languishes at a tepid 11.6 percent in the same late November Realmeter Poll.

--Moon Kook-hyun: Moon, former head of joint-venture Yuhan-Kimberly, announced his bid for presidency in August. He insisted as recently as a couple weeks ago that his approval ratings would exceed 20 percent by the end of November, but he has yet to break out of the single digits.

--Kwon Young-ghil: A National Assembly member and Democratic Labor Party (DLP) candidate registers an approval rating of just under 3 percent.

--Rhee In-jae: The Democratic Party candidate, Rhee's approval hovers around one percent in all polls.

--Shim Dae-pyung: The candidate for the People's First Party, former governor of Chungcheong province and current National Assembly member; he receives little support from any place outside the Chungcheong region.

--Chung Keun-mo: A devout Christian with a PhD in applied physics from the University of Michigan; he is running as the True Sovereignty Alliance candidate and liberals hope he can take some of the Christian vote from Lee Myung-bak.

--Huh Kyung-young: Made a failed presidential bid 10 years ago against Kim Dae-jung; he represents the Economic Republic Party.

--Jeon Kwan: A former ROK Army Ninth Division Commander, Jeon is running for the New Era, New People's Alliance, placing an emphasis on patriotism.

--Keum Min: The youngest candidate on the ballot at 45, Keum represents the Korea Social Party, a DLP-like leftist, progressive party.

--Lee Soo-sung: Lee, now representing the People's Alliance for Unity and Progress, was Prime Minister under Kim Young-sam and hopes to vie for votes in his native Gyeongsang Province, but his influence is likely to remain minimal.

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COMMENT  
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¶11. (C) The overall feeling surrounding the election is one of disappointment at the absence of substantive policy debates, as well as a feeling of the eventuality of a win by Lee Myung-bak. While members of Lee Hoi-chang's camp continue to hold out hope, key members of Chung Dong-young's camp have indicated privately that they have all but given up; not surprising given the struggles that the UNDP

candidate has faced since entering the race.  
VERSHBOW